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ABSTRACT

Composing written text in an educational context engages both students and teachers in struggles between convention and choice, resulting frequently in the negotiation of compromises with which neither teachers nor students feel comfortable. The linguistic traditions of a discipline are powerful determinants of the nature of the language in which students are expected to conceptualize the evidence of the discipline, and to express their concepts in written text. Students learn discipline-specific linguistic conventions that are conceptual frames for intuited, personal, or common sense responses. This changes what is signified by the language, shifting it from the realm of personal or even common knowledge into the more rarefied and authorized realm of discipline-specific knowledge. At the same time it allows for an integration between what is authorized and what is intuited, between convention and choice. If the relationship between convention and choice can be viewed dialectically, the tension between them can be a struggle toward linguistic growth. Examples from students show that conventions are frequently perceived by students and teachers alike as constraints. To make academic language more accessible to students, teachers should evaluate their linguistic conventions and discard those that no longer serve a useful purpose. (SRT)

# Writing as a Thought Process: Site of a Struggle

Sharon Hamilton-Wieler

Whenever we write, for whatever purpose, we locate ourselves in an arena of choices circumscribed by the structures of convention. Confronting these choices within the expectations of various conventions, we struggle to transform our rhetorical intentions to written text. Although this tension is an inescapable feature of all writing, composing written text in an educational context engages both students and teachers in very particular struggles between convention and choice, resulting frequently in the negotiation of compromises with which neither teachers nor students feel comfortable.

The tension exists at many levels. In its broadest sense, convention determines not only what is sayable or what is writable in any given context, but also what is thinkable. The linguistic traditions of each school discipline, by which I mean the nature of the language in which the concepts of the discipline are articulated, are powerful determinants not only of the manner in which teachers and textbooks present the subject in classrooms, but also of the nature of the language in which students are expected to conceptualize the evidence of the discipline, and to express their concepts in written text.

I am reminded, for example, of Julia, an eighteen year old girl studying history of art in the upper sixth form of a comprehensive school in south London. Having been asked by her teacher, Mr. Christopher, to write her responses to a slide of Man Ray's composition, "The Gift" (an iron studded on the sole-plate with nails), she produces the following text:

The Iron

> Once upon a time there lived an iron
> The Gift could be a gift given to someone to hurt them but there seems to be no relevance here.
> Perhaps the artist has made the gift a decorative item (like a painted road cone) to give to the public, thereby confusing them, making statements about the receiving of his work, etc.
> The symbol that 'iron' gives is a useful one. Iron- Ironing- housework?? = housewife ??? equals non-creature consumer goods = functionalism.
> Metaphorical ironing ?? - taking the creases out of things but contradicting by putting nails in it. Perhaps this is how that artist sees the public. (Julia, March 22, 1985)

We can see in this text verbal traces of Julia's mind racing in several directions, as she tries to find her way into a meaningful response to Man Ray's "The Gift." Mr. Christopher's instructions to the class had been, in part, to

> "write what it says to you. I want you to consider what is the difference between thinking about it and writing about it. The object triggers off referential paths that have to do with your own experiences. I want you to trace those referential paths."

Drawing upon her experiential and intertextual knowledge, Julia establishes the fictive world of a nail-studded iron with her introductory "Once upon a time," and speculates upon the artist's intention in creating the composition. She then proceeds to establish a syntacto-semantic relationship among "ironing," "housewife," "non-creature consumer goods," and "functionalism," seeking to relate her experiences with irons to her growing awareness of some concepts of art history. She concludes with an interesting distinction between symbol functioning as a metonymic icon or sign (iron - ironing - housework) and symbol functioning as metaphor ("ironing ?? - taking the creases out of things....).

This text does not function, nor was it intended by teacher or student to function, as a <u>demonstration</u> of learning, of what Julia knows of authorized

readings of dada art, but rather as a way into or means of learning, a way into understanding through articulating her personal responses to a particular work of art. When asked to read it aloud in class, Julia declined, as did all but one of her classmates. Why? She told me after class:

> It didn't seem - well, it really isn't sophisticated enough for this class - not at the right level - too basic ...the language, the ideas, the overall concept - it just didn't seem to fit - you know - the level of conceptualization of the class.

In Julia's view, what is thinkable and what is writable in history of art is prescribed linguistically and conceptually by the traditions articulated in art history textbooks and by her teacher. She intuitively feels there is something flawed in the degree of authority accorded to the powerful determinants of art history convention, and interprets the situation as a two-sided battle between authorized traditions and personal responses, between convention and choice. She writes in the journal she has been keeping:

> In history of art, examinings seem to require a particular attitude, and to question this would confuse the issue and me... I feel as though I'm not really sure what to do, to ignore all personal contradicting feeling and learn, parrot fashion, what the examiner requires does seem a little soulless, but to try, with what little experience I have, to argue around a point only conducted on a personal feeling seems a little stupid.

During one of our discussions about writing in history of art, her teacher, Mr. Christopher, addresses the same struggle between convention and choice:

> How do you put into words the dynamics of the relationship between a large black square and a tiny red square, for example? The relationship is so much greater than language can convey...what the students must do is make manifest what happens in a glance by expanding that experience into a description...and there's a huge gulf between their experience of a painting and the [appropriate] presentation of ideas...the exam assumes an expectation of the nature of the sort of criticism involved - as though there is an

> absolute...a right way and a wrong way to read a painting...there is some opportunity for individual interpretation within a contemporary context on the exam, but I doubt whether a student can be entirely honest in a personal reaction...so I find myself in a dilemma - do you allow for individual interpretation or demand a common understanding.
>
> What I try to aim for is a move toward a common understanding. They need... to know the artist's intention...a student reading of a painting could be naive or sophisticated but they'll get a lower mark if it's out of line with the artist's expressed intention.
>
> We're restricted by trying to get them to pass an examination...it encourages pat, glib reactions...and therefore stultifies concept development....I feel what I'm doing helps develop individual perception, but I sometimes feel it's restrictive.

We see that in response to his dilemma, to the conflict between felt response and authorized response, between choice and convention, Mr. Christopher negotiates a rather awkward compromise, moving his students away from their individual, idiosyncratic reactions in the direction of what he refers to as "a common understanding" - the response authorized by tradition. This compromise is reflected in the writing he assigns his students. Of the twenty writing tasks in upper sixth form history of art, only two focussed on personal response composed in the expressive mode of Julia's "The Iron." Although Mr. Christopher realizes the value of this kind of writing for helping students to explore their personal responses to works of art in relation to their growing understanding of art history, he is reluctant to engage them in this type of writing task more often. His reasons show how, in his case as in the case of many other teachers in all disciplines, conventions function to circumscribe and constrain choices:

1. it is not the function of writing which has been traditionally valued by examiners or required on examinations.

2. it is not a function of writing which formed a part of his educational background and which he feels comfortable using.

3. under pressures of time, it does not seem to be the most efficient means of processing information; moreover, it takes time away from other activities which are essential to completing the history of art syllabus.

Students and teachers of English are confronted with a struggle between convention and choice similar to that articulated by Julia and Mr. Christopher in history of art. Linda, an eighteen year old studying English in the upper sixth form of the same comprehensive school in south London, writes in her journal:

> I find getting across what I think and feel in English very hard. When talking about poems, for example T.S. Eliot's poems, it is very difficult to convey the meaning they give. To account for the different impressions that you gain from a poem is very difficult, because how can you explain what the poem makes you feel? It's just an overall impression.

Yet Linda is very effective in elaborating upon her reactions to Eliot's poems orally to her teacher and classmates. The tension she describes above exists in articulating her responses in institutionally authorized written text, in negotiating a comfortable fit or integration between her conceptualizations and formulations of her personal responses and the conventionalized conceptualization and formulation of literary response as it has been traditionally portrayed in English classrooms. In English, as in all disciplines, students' exposure to printed text is frequently limited to finished products. For the most part they have limited or no access to the struggles and choices involved in conceptualizing and formulating the text. As literary critic, Terry Eagleton, points out:

> The text does not allow the reader to see how the facts it contains were selected, what was excluded, why the facts were organized in this particular way, what assumptions governed this process, what forms of work went into the making of the text, and how all of this might have been different (1983, p.170).

Mrs. Elliot, Linda's English teacher, is very aware of the tension between convention and choice in composing written text in response to a literary work. She expresses her perception of the tension during one of our many talks about writing in a school context:

> Most essays genuinely want [the students'] opinion, but it does assume that it will be a considered, thought-through opinion, formed from standing at the far side of the book, and looking back over it and thinking about the whole thing. Perhaps we don't give them enough time - perhaps we should give them the essay while they're still uncertain, while they're still working through their response.

This, of course, is what Mr. Christopher was attempting to do with his in-class writing task on Man Ray's "The Gift." Linda and Mrs. Elliot in English and Julia and Mr. Christopher in history of art are converging from slightly differing perspectives upon a view of writing as the site of a struggle - the struggle to resolve the dissonance between each individual's personal construction of the world and the view of the world conventionally authorized by the discourse of particular subject areas, and, in a broader sense, the discourse of educational institutions.

I spent a full year observing Mr. Christopher's sixth-form history of art class and Mrs. Elliot's English class in Tiara Glen School in London, as well as a biology class, a sociology class, a history class, and a geography class. During the course of that year, I explored the manner in which written text emerges from the classroom (and wider) contexts, talking extensively with teachers and students, asking twelve students to record their perceptions of their writing development and their responses to their writing tasks in journals, investigating teacher-student interactions, specifically those in which teachers try to enable students to transform information, knowledge, and understanding to written text, and looking at the texts themselves.

It is a rare privilege to be able to spend such an amount of time observing the day to day classroom interactions of six teachers and their students. I had virtually complete access to the arena of struggle in which students are positioned with respect to writing in the educational context, a struggle exacerbated by the specific A-level context, wherein writing functions ultimately to demonstrate to an unknown external examiner the extent of discipline-specific information, knowledge, and understanding a student has acquired and can articulate coherently and conventionally in written text.

Not only in English and history of art did students express their perceptions and frustrations concerning the difficulties of integrating their continually changing, continually growing construction of the world with the conventionally authorized linguistic and conceptual structures of discipline-specific universes of discourse.

I hear Kate's uncomplaining, realistic assertion in history class that

> I could have brought more in [to the Parnell essay] but it wouldn't have been much good because it is, at the moment, doing work for the exam, and that's it. We're not working at things you're especially interested in. We're working at the sort of questions which are likely to come up. If we have a special interest in something that isn't likely to come up, what's the point in using time on it?...it's an intermediate phase - not something to enjoy, but working towards an exam

and Christine, who, after attempting to integrate her own voice more assertively into the conventional discourse of history, sighs in frustration:

> Possibly I'm fussing too much about trying to adopt an interesting style, when at this stage I should just have a structure and try to stick all the facts into it as quickly and as neatly as I can.

I hear Vernon's comments on the degree of specificity required in scientific discourse, and the extent to which he feels his choices at the

syntactic level are arbitrarily, and sometimes unnecessarily, constrained:

> ...it is no use saying "The particles pass through the holes in the membrane;" you have to say "the molecules diffuse across the semi-permeable cell wall." The first sentence is too vague and apparently open to misinterpretation even though I personally would understand exactly what I was trying to say.

In response, Mr. Fox in biology and Mr. Goodman in sociology would suggest that discipline-specific discourse conventions actually generate thoughts that, as Patricia Bizzell writes in her recent article, "What Happens When Basic Writers Come to College?", would not be accessible without the conventions, (Bizzell, 1986).

I recall one particular biology class when Barbara began an answer with the words "The fish diffuses salt into..."

> "No! No! No!" interjected her teacher, Mr. Fox. "A fish cannot diffuse salt into itself... Your statement is biologically wrong. The way I worded it expresses a physical principle. You get your answers wrong not because you don't understand the concept but because you get the language wrong."

Now here's the critical bit:

> "Is your understanding different depending on whether you use your phrasing or mine? The examiner will think so"

It is evident here that Mr. Fox views the conventions of biological discourse not just as syntactic correspondences to semantic intentions, but as cognitive, conceptual organizers, and possibly even determinants of semantic intentions.

A similar event occurred in sociology class when students considered that the perceptions they articulated in what they referred to as "common sense" language, were equally valid for written examination responses as those articulated in what they called "sociological language." What follows is a fragment of discussion between Mr. Goodman, the sociology teacher, and Steve, one of his students:

Mr. G: The first section is 95% interpretive. Make sure that theoretically that's where you score. You have to.....marshall all the theories, cite relevant, concrete, empirical material...

Steve: How'm I gonna actually employ some of that stuff without coming across as being common-sensical?

Mr. G: Certainly in the past people have dealt with these sorts of questions in a very common-sensical way, and then afterwards, when we say, "Well, you should have....referred to 'cultural specificity' or 'historical specificity" and they've said "Ah, I didn't think of that"

In a pragmatic sense, Mr. Goodman is suggesting that sociological terminology which represents sociological concepts or modes of classification, such as 'cultural specificity' and 'historical specificity,' function as heuristics which prompt further sociological analysis. From that perspective, the discourse of the discipline has the potential to enable students in that most critical area of composing: drawing upon their internal resources of knowledge and understanding, and transforming that knowledge and understanding to written text. By using the linguistic conventions of the discipline, what Janet Emig refers to as the "root metaphors" and "organizational paradigms," (Emig, 1983) such as 'social order,' 'social change,' and 'social differentiation' as conceptual 'hangers,' students can more readily apply their tacit and intuitive 'common sense' knowledge to sociologically authorized modes of conceptualizing the evidence of the discipline. To return to Mr. Fox's question of whether what is spoken about changes in some crucial way depending on the terms of reference or signifiers used, Mr. Goodman implies that a more comprehensive, more focused, and deeper response will result from using sociological language. If so, it would appear that using discipline-specific linguistic conventions as conceptual 'hangars' for intuited, personal, or 'common sense' responses does change what is signified, shifting it from the realm of personal or even 'common' knowledge into the more rarefied and

authorized realm of discipline-specific knowledge - at the same time that it allows for an integration between what is authorized and what is intuited, between convention and choice.

This relationship between convention and choice is critically different from the relationship with which I began the discussion. We are still in the arena, still struggling with choices, but the view of that arena which I would now like to offer is defined rather than confined by the structures of convention. If the relationship between convention and choice is perceived as dichotomous, either in terms of one or the other, or pedagogically sequenced so that conventions need to be mastered before choices can be made, the resultant tension is likely to be a struggle of frustration, wherein teachers and students are forced to negotiate uncomfortable compromises. as we noted in some of the preceding discussions. If, however, the relationship is perceived as dialectical, the resultant tension can be a struggle towards linguistic growth. Bizzell describes the discourse of the academic community as "a convention-bound discourse that creates and organizes the knowledge that constitutes the community's world view." (Bizzell, 1986, p.297). The discourses of the other language communities in which our students dwell - their homes, their neighbourhood, their interests or hobbies such as team sports or music lessons - similarly create and organize the knowledge that constitutes each community's world view, and, in the best of all possible worlds, combine and integrate and inform each other as students develop their own emerging constructions of the world in which they live. Such integration however, is neither automatic nor easy for many of our students, and clashes frequently occur, particularly when there is tremendous dissonance between the discourse conventions of the academic community and the discourse conventions of the students' other language communities.

As a profession, for over two decades we have been addressing this problem, the problem of helping our students to integrate their broad, tacit knowledge of wider communities of discourse conventions with discipline-specific discourse conventions in order to broaden their range of language choices in their written text. As a profession, we have a lot more to do. As we have seen from the examples given earlier, conventions are frequently perceived by students and teachers alike as constraints. What needs to be done is for these linguistic conventions to be looked at critically by teachers who use them to carry the burden of conceptualizing the evidence of their respective disciplines. Those which no longer serve a useful purpose, which have become, in Harold Rosen's words, "stultifying and irksome" (Rosen, 1976) should be discarded and replaced. Those which have "been perfected to embody rational thought, ultimately at its highest level" (Rosen, 1976) should be made accessible to students in order that they may feel at ease in the registers which denote the intellectual-linguistic aspects of the discipline. Harold Rosen, writing of the role that the language of schools and textbooks plays in the dialectic between convention and choice, suggests that school

> offers the unique opportunity for access to new kinds of language. Here the pupil will be confronted with verbalized thought on a systematic and ordered basis. This will probably be his only chance, certainly his main chance, of acquiring the language and thought of impersonal observation and description, generalization and abstraction, theories, laws, the analysis of events remote in time or space, argument and speculation. The concepts which make all this possible are embodied in special languages and sub-languages. The more deeply a subject is penetrated and understood the further its language grows from the currency of every day speech and from personal literature. In the effort to master it we lift our thinking towards it and as our thinking develops we use the language with greater confidence and purpose. Its potential is enormous and there are discoveries and fulfilments to be met in our struggles to master it. (Rosen, 1986, p.107).

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